

recognition was Mathembe. She established a fuller communication with her grandfather in death than she had ever been able to achieve in life. Her visits to the Ancestor Grove became daily affairs. When the forests fell silent in that space between evening and night and the glo-globes began to stir themselves in luminescence, she would slip through the forest gate into the perpetual penumbra beneath the great trees that stood in the Grove of Ancestors. Twisted, gnarled trunks, knotted and carbuncled, extended upwards twenty, thirty, forty metres before arching into a dense canopy of branches and red leaves. Dead ancestors cast dark shadows. Each knot, each gnarl and whorl on the trunks, was a soul – a head ten, a hundred, a thousand years old that had been absorbed into the flesh of the tree. If some seemed like faces it was because they were faces: lips, noses, eyes of wood, bearded and haired with red leaves, a slow metamorphosis from flesh life to root life. In the deeper shadows between the root buttresses tiny lights glowed: vials of bioluminescents, placed there with bread and fruit and wine as an offering to the dreamers. Anticipations of oracles to be given, heart-thanks for oracles received. The soul of the dead flying free through the natural matrix of the roots could access an incalculable wealth of information. Occasionally they might be cajoled into offering insight and wisdom on specific problems of the living. Occasionally. More often than not they preferred to remain incommunicado within the nirvana-communion of the Dreaming, the ecstasy of being everything and nothing, everywhere and nowhere, simultaneous and instantaneous at once. The dead surrendered their existenceless existence grudgingly and resented demands to solve problems that would yield to the simple application of common sense. Small wonder the popular belief that the dead were a testy crew.

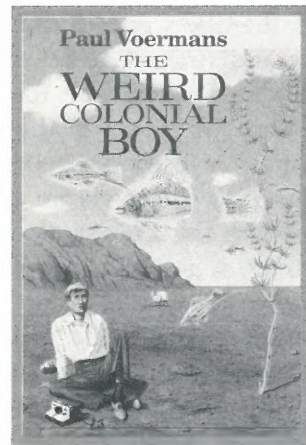
Mathembe moved between moss-carpeted root buttresses glowing in their dark recesses with a thousand tiny bioluminescent stars. Prayer wands, each bearing a paper petition impaled on the end, bent and whispered their messages to the souls of the dead as wind stirred the grove. You had to be careful of those long, thin wands in the twilight between the trees. Only the season before an old woman coming to nag her dead husband about his selfishness in leaving her a widow had tripped, fallen and needed a new left eye grown in by the medicals. No uncertain petition to leave on a prayer wand, a left eyeball. She had died the following season. Prayer answered. Mathembe slipped between the swaying prayer wands. Half dendrified heads rolled their eyes to watch her

pass by. Framed by wooden lips forever half-open, moss-green tongues shaped silent syllables.

Her grandfather's head was the lowest on the tree that had sent the souls of two hundred generations of Filelis into the Dreaming. The callous of wood immediately above him, which still bore a caricature of a face, was Mathembe's grandmother. Her absorption into the Dreaming had been swift and blessed: Mathembe's grandfather had told Mathembe that he had searched long for her along the roots and fibres of the matrix but always in vain. He wondered that she might have transferred her spirit on to one of the Saint-ships that on rare occasions entered planetary space and sent her mind flying out across the universe among the Daughter Worlds. It was a great sorrow to him that beyond the loneliness of death could be the loneliness of the Dreaming.

THE WEIRD COLONIAL BOY

PAUL VOERMANS



Soon he felt much better. Bright thoughts penetrated the demented riff of self-pity in him. After all, he wasn't the average stupid Georgian peasant. He had his fair share of the typical modern Australian virtues: dauntless courage, a body honed by rugged outdoor life, a fine education, and above all an ability to hoodwink the gullible. Like Bing Crosby in that musical about King Arthur he could wow the locals with his twentieth-century know-how. He could go to the gold-fields in Ballarat before anyone else and pick up a fortune off the ground. He might write a future history which would prevent depressions and world wars. Yes, and to make a living he could become an inventor.

him. It occurred to him that he must look like a captain making his farewells before a difficult voyage, and he laughed inside his mask.

Redd clambered into the boat down a knotted rope, his feet skidding on ends of roots polished to the consistency of smooth iron by blowing dust. Hands reached up and helped him teeter into his seat, and then the mast was lowered into the boat and set in its step. A bird shape was nailed to the top of the mast, wide narrow wings spread. It was an ironwood carving of a cliff eagle, which spent almost all its life on wing, sailing the thermals of Tiger Mountain's cliffs. It was the symbol of the Free Yankees, for both touched land only when necessary; cliff eagles to incubate their eggs and raise their young, the Free Yankees to render dust rays.

A big triangular sail was hauled up. It filled with wind and in an instant the little boat leaped forward, its flat frictionless hull hissing and banging as it skimmed the crests of the dust waves. The shoal dwindled from a ragged island to a speck, was lost in the vastness of the red sea. Lee paid attention to the business of handling the boat. A scoop like the V-shaped plough of a bulldozer acted as rudder, its long tiller hauled by two people. The boat was tacking into the wind, following the broad dark wake of the dust ray. At every other leg of each tack, abrasive dust fumed across the boat. Despite his coveralls, Lee's whole body was soon alive with incendiary itches as the fine stuff worked through seals and into every crease and fold of his skin. He had to keep wiping away powder that clung to his goggles.

He was given the task of pumping up silvery floats with a set of foot-operated bellows. Around him, the others were measuring out lengths of cable into neat loops. The harpoonist was checking out her weapons and showing Redd what to do.

Each long harpoon was tipped with a hollow, triangular barbed head; a cap that screwed into the hollow head held an explosive charge. Redd handed one to Lee, who hefted it, found a grip at its point of balance. Redd shouted to the harpoonist that it didn't seem possible to throw it any distance, and she shrugged and waggled her hands either side of her masked head: body laughter. Then she clamped something to the shaft of the harpoon, just behind the grip. It was a cluster of powder rockets. The harpoon was a low-tech rocket-assisted missile.

By now, the shoal had vanished. Lee found he kept looking to starboard, at the shield-wall cliffs rearing up from the shadows at the tumbled bases. So it was that he missed the first sighting, but, alerted by the muffled shouts of the Free

Yankees, he saw the plume of the dust ray when it rose again: a sudden double sheet of darker dust which shot high into the air and ruffled out in long billows on the breeze.

The plume was dust, taken in as the ray sieved the sea for plankton, that had been ejected from the ray's fine barbed combs by a kind of convulsive cough.

Redd, his masked face next to Lee, said that it was a big son of a bitch. Lee had to agree. Up in the prow, the muscular harpoonist was arming her weapons, banging the explosive charges into sockets at their points with cheerful gusto. Everyone else ducked as the boat heeled to starboard and the sail swung across. The harpoonist handed Redd a harpoon, and at the same time Lee saw the ray.

Its wide carbon whisker wings stretched a hundred metres either side of its long flat armour-plated body. The wings were as black as a vacuum shadow. (Miriam was suddenly with Lee, standing just behind him, it seemed, and it was difficult for him not to turn to her.) They ceaselessly rippled over the bronze surface of the dust as the ray moved forward with dreamy slowness amidst a fine haze. Its combs rose like signal arms against the pink sky, fantastic fringed sculptures a dozen metres across, swept down and out across the dust, collapsed into its mouth. A double sheet of dust shot up, and the filter combs swept out again.

The little round sailboat tacked away from the wake of darker dust churned by the ray's passage. For a moment it ran parallel to the rippling edge of the creature's port wing; then it tacked inward. Its hull shudderingly vibrated as it dragged across the tough tissue-thin wing. Lee ducked the sail's swinging boom, saw the harpoonist rise as the boat turned parallel to the ray's body.

The ray was as long as a locomotive, as flattened as a bed bug. Its tiny eye, like a bottle end set in its blunt armoured head, was red as a stoplight. Breathing spiracles densely fringed with hairs pulsed arhythmically down the midline of its long flat body.

The harpoonist beckoned to Redd, had him brace one foot on the blunt raised prow, and handed him the harpoon. It was, symbolically, not attached to a line; nor was it armed. She moved his right arm and harpoon back, told him to throw when she did, it didn't matter where. Then she reached across and lit the rocket fuses.

'Throw!'

The cowboy threw as hard as he could. Sparks from the fuses sprayed his shoulder; the harpoon tipped head up as the rockets ignited, made a wobbling arc and struck the ray's body behind